East of Windsor Street the character of Cambridgeport is very different. Two large parcels of land, formerly a crowded and depressed district, were cleared to make room for two Federal housing projects just before World War II. Although light and airy and undoubtedly a more healthful environment than the slums they replace, New Towne Court (Fig. 386) and Washington Elms lack visual accent or contrast between spaces. An instructive comparison can be made between these monotonous large projects and the much smaller and more attractive Wilson Court (Fig. 389), built in 1949 on Magazine Street.

Cambridgeport South

The portion of Cambridgeport south of Massachusetts Avenue is more extensive than the northern portion. Street pattern and architectural character suggest two main subdivisions, with River Street the dividing line. The larger of the two sections, located south of Central Square and traversed by a gridiron of streets, is called Cambridgeport South in this report, though most people today know it simply as Cambridgeport. The Riverside district, located northwest of River Street, will be discussed separately.

The main portion of southern Cambridgeport is traversed by four parallel streets — Pleasant, Magazine, Pearl and Brookline — that run in a north-south direction from Massachusetts Avenue to the river. Cross streets are narrower than the dominant thoroughfares and are staggered slightly so that few of them are more than one or two blocks long. Only on four streets — Green, Franklin, Allston, and Putnam — can one traverse the entire area in an east-west direction.

Compared to northern Cambridgeport, this area is pervaded by an air of greater spaciousness and unity. One’s first impression of unity is due to the constant direction maintained by the long streets (Fig. 387), the uniform intervals between the cross streets, and the sustained setbacks. The main streets are so dominant that a visitor is at first almost unaware of the cross streets. But as he discovers them, he realizes that they vary considerably one from another, Southern Cambridgeport has more variety than is first apparent.

In northern Cambridgeport the major thoroughfares received the earliest and also the finest houses. In southern Cambridgeport the basis for development was somewhat different, for the streets only had to handle local traffic to and from Massachusetts Avenue. Even after construction of the Cottage Farm Bridge in 1850 (on the site of the present Boston University Bridge), there was little through traffic, because Cottage Farm was still rural. Brookline Street, which leads to the bridge, has become a major thoroughfare only in modern times. The choice of building locations in southern Cambridgeport seems to have been determined by other factors, such as land elevation or proximity to Central Square. It is interesting to observe the sequential addition of cross streets south of Central Square. In 1830 there were only three cross streets; in 1854 there were six (to Upton Street); and by the 1873 atlas the present street layout was virtually complete.

The preference for high land was natural, and hill crests were used for the finest houses. Since land was plentiful, low or swampy areas were simply skipped over until all desirable lots were used. Only then did it become economically feasible to fill in the low areas as locations for factories, warehouses, or multi-family dwellings. In any case the low-lying areas were built late, often for mixed occupancy.
Magazine Street extends south from Central Square to the site of old powder magazine (hence the street name) on Captain’s Island. From the outset Magazine Street was intended to be the area’s finest street. Fifty feet wide, it is ten feet wider than Pearl or Pleasant Streets, whichparallel it, and it has wider setbacks. It also has the amenity of a residential park halfway along its course. Beginning at the relatively high level of Central Square (sixteen feet above sea level), Magazine Street slopes almost imperceptibly to a low point (ten feet) near Hamilton Street. It then rises gently over a low hill whose 22-foot crest lies between Putnam Avenue and Chestnut Street before dropping off toward Granite Street and the river. The location of the former Captain’s Island (now landlocked) is between Memorial Drive and the water.

By the 1840’s Magazine Street was becoming important. Washington Allston had situated his studio at the corner of Auburn, and two of Cambridgeport’s largest Greek Revival houses bordered the street. The apogee of Magazine Street’s fashion was reached shortly before the Civil War, when six mansions were constructed for Cambridgeport businessmen. These buildings were almost as impressive as the largest houses then going up on Dana Hill. Substantial dwellings continued to be built during the 70’s, and as late as the early 80’s two large Queen Anne houses were constructed near Magazine and Putnam. By 1900, however, the area had passed its prime, as evidenced by conversion of the S. H. Sanborn mansion at number 129 into a three-decker. Further decline of fashion is chronicled by the removal of the A. C. Sanborn and Kimball houses and the substitution of rows of duplexes between 1906 and 1927.

Actually, the two ends of the street retain more interest than the low-lying quarter-mile middle interval. The Central Square end has changed little in the last sixty years, but it was never prepossessing. The collection of churches, apartments, and houses has little in common architecturally, though each recalls some phase of the district’s history or has some redeeming feature of scale or architectural detail. The line of brick row houses at 13-21 Magazine, called Allston Terrace (Fig. 144), stands on the site of Washington Allston’s studio; the red brick First Baptist Church (Fig. 191) has sufficient height and animation to serve as the focal point for Central Square. Here also a certain restlessness of scale results from the alternation of single dwellings and four-deckers.

Only at Cottage Street does Magazine Street assert itself as a substantial residential area. Yet at Dana Square (Fig. 388) this unity begins to fall apart. Laid out in 1856, the square never fulfilled the Dana expectations of a splendid residential core for a neighborhood of fine houses. Although half a dozen large dwellings were built on or near the square by 1873, much land remained vacant until filled with less impressive structures. The Willard School formerly stood on the east side of the square, but it has been demolished and its site added to the park, which is now almost twice its original size and looks quite empty. The buildings that surround the square do not contain it visually. The double house and three-decker on the east side are not large enough to define the park’s limits, while the apartment and parochial school buildings along the south side are incompatible in scale and material with the dwellings along the west and north sides.

Despite the presence of such fine houses, Magazine Street does not now and probably never did give the impression of an avenue of mansions. Along the half-mile stretch where the mansions were distributed, there were vacant lots, even whole tracts of empty land. The area was simply too extensive for the demand. Had less space been available and the fine dwellings placed nearer together, their impact would have been considerably greater. As it is, Magazine Street has no definable center of interest.
The most interesting feature of this middle zone is Woodrow Wilson Court (Fig. 389). A public housing project built in 1949, it is unusually successful in avoiding the barracks-like anonymity characteristic of many projects. The three four-story buildings key together to break the large interior courtyard into an interesting and lively space; they are also well adapted to Magazine Street. Preservation of a private house with heavily wooded yard at one corner of the block assists in the successful transition of scale from three-story apartments to single-family dwellings (Fig. 390); Wilson Court does not disengage itself from its environment as so many housing projects do; its site planning can serve as a model.

Beyond Fairmont Street for a distance of three blocks the character of Magazine Street is inconclusive. There is an assortment of houses, stores, row houses, and apartments as well as a large lot left vacant by the demolition of a line of row houses. Not until higher ground is reached does the impressive aspect of the street again assert itself. Immanuel Baptist Church, a brick Richardsonian Romanesque building with corner tower, handsomely anchors the corner of Magazine Street and Putnam Avenue (Fig. 197). Here also on the low hilltop three of Cambridgeport’s finest mansions once stood amidst large lawns. Only in the two-family houses that replace them is there a feeling of crowding; generally the neighborhood retains much dignity. The last buildings on the street as it descends to the river are three-deckers built soon after 1900.

Pearl Street has always been more modest than Magazine. Because it is narrower and the houses more closely built, the street resembles a space corridor along which one’s eye moves at a more rapid pace than on Magazine Street, where the gaze is leisurely and meandering. Because the first houses built here were small, they contrast in scale more sharply with the multi-family units constructed later in the empty intervening lots. The most interesting parts of the street are those where the housing is fairly dense: the row houses south of Green Street (Figs. 138-139) and the double and row houses opposite Cottage Street (Fig. 391). Further south the street’s architectural character changes abruptly several times, but Pearl Street always remains visually separate from its cross streets. Because of this separateness and unevenness, preservation efforts would be best directed at houses that are essential to the architectural integrity of the cross streets.

Pleasant Street has almost the same length and breadth as Pearl, but its urban character is quite different. For architectural quality the most interesting part occurs at the intersection of Pleasant and River Streets (Fig. 392). Fronting on the lively and varied space created by this diagonal crossing are an assortment of very good Greek Revival, Bracketed, and Mansard houses. River Street, unfortunately, is such a major traffic route that the desirability of this portion for living is substantially impaired. South of this intersection Pleasant Street is more deserving of its name. Tree-lined and no wider than the streets that cross it, Pleasant fuses with them and unites them so that one thinks of the whole region.
from Upton to Fairmont as a single neighborhood. This does not mean that there is no variation among the cross streets but rather that all of them have more relation to Pleasant than to Magazine or River Streets, which bound the area. Here most of the houses are small but placed on comfortable lots. The dominant architectural feature is the mansard roof, but there are a few Bracketed designs; Chalk and Kelly have several nice Queen Anne designs as well. Some of the houses may now seem drab because of their present skin of asphalt shingles, but this is a superficial defect. Restoration would be easy and inexpensive. More difficult but important would be the removal of one filling station and one brick store building, which badly mar the integrity of the street. Elimination of through traffic on Pleasant Street would also help. The potential of this area for historic conservation is exceptional.

A special word should be said about Fairmont Street, which has particular assets and problems. Except for one ugly two-decker and an absence of trees (a defect easily remedied), the eastern half of Fairmont resembles a Colonial village (Fig. 393). Here are three houses of Federal date, including the center-chimney cottage illustrated in Fig. 82, and several Mansard designs. But west of Pleasant, a most unpleasant crowding occurs where two late three-deckers were sandwiched between earlier dwellings. The rest of the street is good, particularly the handsome double Greek Revival house at 55-57 Fairmont (Fig. 88) and the manner in which the west extremity of the street is dominated by brick construction. Worthy of comment is the intersection of Fairmont and River Streets, where both corner buildings reach the sidewalk and thus shield Fairmont from the noise and traffic of River Street. Also successful is the contrast between the row houses built close to the street on one side and the nicely spaced dwellings with front yards on the other. Fairmont Street is further linked with Fairmont Avenue and Andrew Street. Most of the houses in these streets are double units of only average architecture, but these narrow streets are only one block long, and the spatial relationship of the houses to the street is eminently human. The whole is an area of modest homes whose aesthetic value can be easily but strikingly improved. The major expense would be the removal of the three-deckers that in this particular location are a clear visual and economic deterrent.

Architecturally, Brookline Street is but half a street. One side holds commercial buildings and factories; the other is still largely residential, though here commercialism has gained a toehold in the form of parking lots and machine shops. The dwellings that remain are neglected, and one can see the corrosive influences of commerce at work upon a residential neighborhood. In a few places industrial use extends through half a block toward Pearl Street, but these particular blocks were never wholly occupied by residences.

East of Brookline Street, all the way to the railroad tracks, the area is or could be industrial. Except for a few handsome factories at the northern end, the district is architecturally sterile. Near the southern end, barricaded by warehouses and truck trailers, is Fort Washington (Fig. 394), the city's sole surviving physical reminder of Revolutionary War activity. A worse surrounding for an historic site would be hard to imagine. The setting has been especially bad since the City permitted a trucking company to close Allston Street, thereby cutting Fort Washington off from residential Cambridgeport. The only hope for this historic landmark is that changes emanating from M.I.T. may someday reach here; of particular value would be the reopening of a connection between Fort Washington and the river.

In the realm of urban organization and planning, the biggest surprise awaiting the Cambridgeport visitor is the Hastings Square neighborhood. As one approaches on Brookline Street from Massachusetts Avenue, the quality of the neighborhood declines steadily to Hamilton Street. Yet only three blocks further, one comes abruptly into one of the most pleasant Queen Anne neighborhoods in all of Cambridge. On the crest of a low rise near the former site of the Dana Pine Grove stands Hastings Square (Fig. 395). Projected by
1852, it attracted a scattering of Mansard and Bracketed houses in the 1860's, including the much-altered mansion and coach house at 308 Brookline Street. But not until the 80's did the area really blossom. Some thirty dwellings were constructed, the finest within a few doors of the square. This neighborhood is in excellent condition and needs little restoration. Unhappily the Inner Belt would go right through the square and down the middle of the district. The houses remaining on both sides of the highway would become appendages of neighborhoods with less interesting dwellings, and all of the environmental values of Hastings Square would be destroyed.

The paucity of east-west traffic routes south of Massachusetts Avenue has already been mentioned. The staggered street layout creates a series of short residential blocks that are subordinate to the north-south streets. These short streets vary considerably in architectural character and in their potential for preservation. Green and Franklin streets have already been absorbed by the commercial activity of Central Square. Auburn Street, on the other hand, is largely residential. Although five of the Federal houses shown on the 1830 map are preserved, the area acquired a fair number of three-deckers around the turn of the century. What is left is worth preserving, but the street will never be a showplace, and some of the nicest houses would unfortunately be destroyed if the Inner Belt were built. While the scale of Auburn Street is more like that of East Cambridge than any other part of Cambridgeport, that of William Street (the next street to the south) is larger because of the number of double houses. Most of the houses are Greek Revival or Bracketed designs, but the unity of the street is marred by the bulky brick apartment building at the corner of Magazine Street.

Cottage Street is the other most likely candidate for historic preservation in southern Cambridgeport. Only two blocks long, it has definable and defensible limits, and its strategic corners are occupied by original buildings. No large-scale rebuilding or demolition has yet afflicted it, although (as do all the other cross streets off Magazine Street) it has one or two three-deckers that disturb its otherwise excellent character. The view toward the east is closed by the Pearl Street row illustrated in Fig. 391; the opposite end opens into the triangular space where River and Pleasant Streets intersect (Fig. 392). The row of five Greek Revival cottages between 36 and 50 is one of the nicest groups in the whole city (Fig. 396), and there is an interesting group of double cottages at the Pearl Street corner. The good Bracketed house at the corner of Magazine Street (Fig. 110) demonstrates how delightful the whole street could be.

The further from Central Square one goes, the later the date of the buildings. Only one block in length, Perry Street has some good Bracketed and Mansard structures. Its Magazine Street corners are occupied by two very good buildings: the 1886 Grace Methodist Church (Fig. 196) and a delightful Greek Revival and Bracketed double house (Fig. 120). The disappointingly heterogeneous character of the streets fronting Dana Square has already been commented on. The buildings on Erie need little restoration, only the good fortune to be spared from the tactless hand of modernization that has already reduced several fine houses to utter anonymity.

At Hamilton Street the district begins to deteriorate. On the south side of the street are several Bracketed houses with pleasant side yards, but the other side is pitted by two unfortunate apartment buildings. The empty corner lot where once stood a line of row houses is an eyesore and a source of potential architectural danger to the whole southern area. It would be fortunate if three or four houses displaced by new construction elsewhere could be located here. If, instead, the replacement is to be a new structure, let us hope it is not as barren and out-of-scale as the recent small apartment building at 222 Hamilton Street.